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Information Overload... @Your Library

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Information overload ...@ your library

by LouAnn Blocker

Reading Nicholas Carr's recent book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, has led me to reflect on elements of our information environment and that of our users. He makes several main points in the book, one of which is that the Internet, cell phones or e-mail being constantly "on" distracts us when we're trying to be contemplative, and that repeated skimming of information and less deep concentration on it rewires our brains so that we become better at skimming and worse at focusing. Other authors think so, too: "The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention — the building block of intimacy, wisdom and cultural progress." (Jackson 13)

Carr also states that the process of moving information from your working memory to your long-term memory can be disrupted by distractions. This is known as cognitive overload. These issues are subsets of the larger topic of information overload. This paper will define and briefly discuss information overload and provide tips for our own use and our use with users.

Information overload can be defined as being overwhelmed by too much information in general or too much to make a particular decision. Kathryn Hensiak defines it as receiving so much data that you are "unable to engage in higher levels of processing" (87) and states that there are two types: upkeep overload and task overload. One happens when you feel pressure to keep up with new developments in your field, and the other when you become overwhelmed by the amount of information available when researching one topic. In addition to the problem of more information out there to process nowadays, information "float" time, or the amount of time information spends in a communication channel, has decreased. You don't have to wait for the evening news: You can check the Internet for updates anytime. (Hensiak 88) She doesn't mention this, but the decreased float time probably adds to distraction and multitasking because, as Carr states, we are wired to look for new information and feel the pull of constantly checking for it. (16, 117) Living in these conditions is not just an inconvenience of modern life. The stress resulting from overload and distraction can cause delayed decisions, inability to distinguish between important and unimportant decisions and can even cause memory loss. It can cause physical symptoms such as lowered immunity, headaches or stomach problems. (Gallagher 115-119, 196; Hensiak 93)

Sometimes we stop to answer the telephone or greet visitors to the office, lose focus and have to get it back when returning to a project. It has been estimated that interruptions take up 28 percent of a knowledge worker's day. (Spiva 10) If you are deep into a planning session or writing project, it can take 20 minutes to fully recover from one interruption. Try to foster a culture at your workplace where it's acceptable to close the office door when needed, and for those in cubicles to put up "do not disturb except for emergencies" signs. The benefit for everyone is that when we practice uninterrupted concentration and enter a flow state, we become better at it and take on "progressively greater challenges to keep on experiencing flow." (Gallagher 111)

A recent editorial asked "If You Could Freeze-Frame the Information Flow, What Would You Do?" and shared the editorial board's answers. All would work on neglected long-term projects, given one month to stop new information from coming in. (Foster 1) Though a month is impossible, could you schedule uninterrupted time each day to concentrate on a project? Can you

allow yourself to file some of the alerts you need to process, or other tasks that come up, and deal with them on a scheduled, project basis? Does even thinking of a day or an afternoon without anything new crossing your desk give you a delicious tingle? I feel it, and I've been in my current position for less than a year.

Spiva states that "E-mail is the pre-eminent culprit of information overload, and its effectiveness has been reduced as more and more e-mails go ignored for days at a time." (16) The more e-mails a particular person receives that interrupt work projects, the more cumulative the problem of interruption and then recovery of focus becomes. (Mano 63) Another problem besides volume is that people use e-mail for many more tasks than communication. Archiving, scheduling meetings, document delivery, storing phone numbers and addresses — if you aren't using a system that assists you in these additional tasks, it can be frustrating and time-consuming.

You will feel less overwhelmed if you take some measures to control your environment. (Bawden 187) Decide how many listservs, blogs and RSS feeds you have time to read and which don't mesh with your interests. Have items from lists of less interest sent directly to a folder and only read them if the subject becomes important to you later. Use a filter that routes all messages you are "cc"ed on to a folder, so only messages addressed directly to you come to your inbox. There are software solutions for searching across folders to find archived information and for managing the other noncommunication tasks mentioned above. Xobni is software particularly recommended for use in searching Microsoft Outlook. (Libava, n.p.) Carve out some time for yourself or your e-mail-intensive employees to learn new software or methods of managing these tasks.

What can you and your co-workers do to make e-mail life easier for everyone? Designate one or two people to follow a topic and give executive summaries to the others, so they can let go of some listservs and feel free to delete some messages. In forwarding a message from an outside source, add a brief "here's what this means for us." Add "ignore previous messages" to a subject line of a string of messages on one topic so people are alerted that something has changed.

Never send a message without a subject line. In messages going to a

group, make it clear when you only need a reply sent to you, not to all, so co-workers boxes aren't clogged with responses. Add a "no hurry" or "FYI only" to assist co-workers. Use the red flag with discretion. Include an entire string in replies, so that, at the end of a discussion, everyone involved can delete all but the last message in the string.

IM might be better for quick contact and items that don't need to be archived. (Spiva 24) If you've gotten in the habit of using e-mail as a kind of IM with some co-workers, communicate with them your plans to set times to check e-mail and not leave it "on" all the time. Walk down the hall to their office and talk sometimes — provided, of course, that their door is open!

These are a few things we can do for ourselves. What about our users, particularly the younger ones? Their information environment is one of "homogenized diversity." (Bawden 181) We have many more varied types of information available to us than ever before. However, the distinctive look of former print resources has sometimes disappeared. Young people in this environment don't always make distinctions among types of sources. They have always lived in a world of information overload and use techniques like "queuing" information to deal with later or ignoring a great deal of information. (Savolainen 612-613) Determining quality has always been difficult, and that difficulty has increased. Adjusting library information and instruction in such an environment is essential.

For almost all of human history, the information problem was one of not enough. (Bawden 182) Students used to assume that they had to come to the library to get what they needed for research projects. That's no longer an assumption. We must assert the quality and relevance of the information sources unique to us. This starts with instruction. Try writing the dollar amount of what your library spends on resources on the board, then discuss how that information is different from what's free.

Instead of plunging into how to search databases that don't look all that amazing to the denizens of the world of homogenized diversity, engage your students in a discussion of kinds and sources of information and the basis of quality, then lead them to an appreciation of information selection and organization and the time they'll save in the long run by learning to navigate our system. An online shopping analogy helps orient new researchers to library database organization. You can look for

products by keyword or category, just as you can look for information. If an item is online but not available at the store, that's analogous to finding an item in a database that's not owned by your library, then requesting it through interlibrary loan. Making connections to what they are already familiar with will help them retain the information.

Be brave and limit yourself to demonstrating one database and the library catalog in a session and leave more time for practice. Students can then try other useful databases you've listed on a handout with search tips or with links to tutorials created by the library staff or vendors. Show one or two features of a database and allow students to discover the additional search tools on their own and point out the help files for later. After all, you don't want cognitive overload to prevent your students from retaining what they've learned. One great tip is deceptively simple: Provide handouts prepunched. (Reichardt 109) This makes them easy to file away and find later.

Look out for reference overload: providing the user with so many sources they have difficulty focusing. (Reichardt 108) Here are reasons I sometimes fall into this bad habit. I treat the user as I want to be treated, which isn't useful. I could absorb a lot more information about possible places to look than most users could. I want to treat all users the same. Some users may be able to keep up with me as I rapidly jump from one possibility to the next. Others may not. I'm afraid that the user won't come back, so I have to give them everything now, or that they will come back, and they won't get someone with the same knowledge I have on a particular topic. I am afraid that it will get busier at the desk, so I load them up while it's slow. I'm afraid not to explore every source, because I could miss the one article that's perfect for them. Most users aren't looking for perfect articles for every research project. They are "satisficers": Knowing that sometimes examining all possible sources or knowing all perspectives on an issue aren't necessary, they select what's "good enough." (Bawden 185, Gallagher 128)

We may suffer from "access services overload," because we fear that users won't know about policies that could negatively affect them. Concise policy handouts and providing the same information online are a good solution. Many handouts or Web guides could be made shorter by adding links to more information and breaking information into chunks. Use bullet points instead of long paragraphs to explain policies and procedures. If you use video tutorials, divide them into segments, so if the user only needs part of the information, they can find it quickly.

We are information professionals, and we should trust our own knowledge of which sources are best. Trim bibliographies and subject pages to the most useful sources, then offer catalog subject headings or other pointers to others. (Hensiak 95, Reichardt 111)

Some of these ideas may feel like compromises or "dumbing down" our services. However, by lessening information overload, they make our users feel less anxious, happier with library services and more likely to come back for more. Lessening library anxiety and simplifying the process for beginning researchers may assist them in cutting out some distractions and overload, thereby helping them get to the focused reading and contemplation they need to do after the library visit is over. ⏭

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